

The Foster Family

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Isaac G. Foster's Journey
(From an Interview with Mrs. L. Chittenden, Santa Barbara)

When Isaac G. Foster and his family crossed the plains in 1854, they were part of a vast caravan. There were, in the main train to which their wagon belonged, about 500 vehicles. But these were not all in one compact and continuous procession. On the contrary they were strung out for many miles over the prairie.

The main train was divided into many groups or units, ranging from a half-dozen to twenty or thirty wagons. Because of the dust, which rose in stifling clouds from the pounding of hoofs and the churning of wheels, the units sometimes were separated by considerable distances. Thus it was possible for a band of hostile Indians to swoop down on one of them when other units, ahead and behind, were only a few miles away.

Each of the small groups was independent in the matter of protection at night. The camp was never left unguarded. The night was usually divided into two watches-- from nightfall until midnight; and from midnight until dawn. The guards were always on the alert for an Indian attack and for a possible stampede by the animals. Stampedes usually took place before or during a storm of unusual violence. When the groups were small, the night watch was burdensome, because it fell too frequently on the men of the party.

The speed of the groups varied. Some would lay up for a day or two while the main train went on. The majority preferred to let the roads dry out after a storm, but those having vigorous stock usually struck out despite bad weather. They were anxious to reach California and the gold diggings. But there was also an advantage to be gained in being first: Water for drinking and cooking was more plentiful and less likely to be polluted; and feed was more plentiful.

One of the units in the train with which Isaac G. Foster crossed was the Burrell party. It consisted of Mrs. Mary Burrell, her daughter Mary, aged nineteen; her son, Edward, and the latter's wife; Mrs. Edward Burrell's parents, English people by the name of Hannibal; Isaac Harter and Putnam Robson, two young men who afterwards figured prominently in the social, political and business life of San Francisco; Wesley Tonner, who was engaged to young Mary Burrell; Silas

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180 Wightman and Oscar Wightman, brothers; and "the boys," three young lads known as Alex, Frank and Stucky, whose last names were unknown.

For a considerable part of the journey the wagons of Isaac G. Foster and of several of his comrades who formed a party, traveled with the Burrells. Isaac G. was a welcome addition, for he was a good friend and a cheerful companion. His family at that time consisted of his wife, his son Eugene P. Foster, now a resident of Ventura, then a boy of five; Lucy Foster (Sexton), barely able to toddle about; and another son, Fred, who was born on the journey.

Mary Burrell, the younger, was a lively, rosy-cheeked, good-looking girl who found a great deal to enjoy during the trip. She was quite accomplished as a musician. Like many others she kept a diary which was preserved by members of her family. Her engagement to Wesley Tonner was announced before they started westward. The neighbors wagged their heads wisely, and declared no engagement would stand the strain of so much hard work and worry under disillusioning circumstances. But they were mistaken;

the young people were more deeply in love at the end of the journey than they were at the beginning, and the wedding followed their arrival in California. Unfortunately Mary Burrell Tonner died while still a young woman in her thirties.

According to her diary, the members of the Burrell party left Joliet, Illinois, in the spring of 1854 for the west. They went to St. Louis by railroad, and took a steamboat for Council Bluffs, the eastern end of the Overland Trail. Here they outfitted and set forth hopefully on the great adventure. Some of the pioneers had horses for their wagons as well as riding animals. But much of the draft work was done by yokes of oxen. Each family took its own milch cows and other stock along, so fresh milk was plentiful along the way. In fact, there were many comforts and delicacies made available by the resourcefulness of those sturdy men and women.

The Foster and Burrell families were acquainted in Illinois before they started west. In Mary Burrell's diary there is no mention of the Fosters until May 7, 1854, when she wrote:

"We came up with the Foster family on the Elkhorn, near the Platte river. There was a terrible wind today. I was blown over while eating my dinner, and the victuals were full of sand."

181 On May 8, the next day, is this entry: "Isaac Foster passed us but crossed the same creek at a ford without any difficulty. We wished to join his company on account of getting clear of watching so often." This refers to the night guards against the Indians. By the way, Miss Burrell herself took her turn like the men as a guard, and stood watch in the cold and the rain on many nights, straining her ears for the first sounds of the stampede, or for the stealthy approach of hostile Indians.

A day or two after the Burrell wagon struck a narrow bridge at an angle. The horses became frightened, leaped and plunged and, beyond the control of the driver, fell into the river, dragging the wagon with them on its side. Fortunately Miss Burrell and her mother were not aboard at that time, or they would, undoubtedly, have been caught in the body of the vehicle and drowned. After a good deal of work and excitement the outfit was rescued, though with some loss.

On May 10 Mary Burrell writes: "We crossed the Loup fork about noon. We spent the forenoon shoeing cows. We had a very bad time crossing. We camped near a well with good water, though very little of it. We are with the Fosters again."

May 14: "A fine day; heavy dew last night. We eat heartily and feel well. Are in good spirits. Going to California is not such a hard task after all. We see the Fosters' company every day." Isaac Foster was captain of his group of wagons-- the man who determined the length of the journey daily, the camping places and similar questions.

May 19: "Passed Pawnee swamps. Very muddy; got through the mud. There was scarcely any wood and water. Sloughed (bogged down) twice and had to get out and wade. We used slough water and buffalo chips and willow sprouts to cook. We rode horses without bridles, jumped holes, and killed a skunk, which made Isaac Foster sick."

May 20: "Saw four antelope, lizard, blue snake; many beautiful flowers, purple peas like sweet peas, a sort of dock or sorrel. We are on the south side of the Platte. Gnats and mosquitoes are numerous, and poisonous with their stings."

On the twenty-fifth of May, the diary recites, the train, or group, did not travel until noon. "We spent the time rambling among ruins and riding horseback with Isaac Foster and other friends."

June eighth is described by Miss Burrell as a "delightful day. We are twenty-five miles from the Platte. Passed some graves; climbed Prospect hill with Isaac and friends." The hill was so steep that the women got to the top only by hanging onto the coattails of the men.

Lucy Foster Sexton
The Foster Family
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